

American Attitudes toward Mexican Immigration

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In this article, the author recognizes the negative sentiments many Americans have towards Mexican immigrants, despite their historical roots in this nation and their economical contributions to American society. The questionable manner in which the acquisition of Texas and other states through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo are discussed. Mexican immigrants later played a pivotal role in sustaining economic activity as the U.S. focused on World War I & II, but their labor was often exploited through low pay and long hours. Even in modern times, American citizens have not developed an appreciation for the contributions of the Mexican immigrant and are seeking ways to limit their migration into the United States.

¹Since the beginning of the Mexican-American War, this country has had an interesting and conflicted relationship with Mexico. This could be a direct result of the history behind how certain originally Mexican territories became part of the United States or the fact that it borders so closely to Mexico. Either way, it is interesting that many American citizens have negative attitudes toward Mexican immigration, despite the fact that many states in the U.S. are actually former territories of Mexico.

Knowing this, one may ask, "What gives these states and their citizens the right to exclude Mexicans from entering the US in search of their

own economic freedom or otherwise?" This question is especially pertinent given the fact that the foundation of America was built on the idea of providing the freedom to actualize one's own idea of economic and political success. However, taking into consideration the current climate of protest towards Mexican immigration, the ideology of freedom for all does not actually apply to everyone. An interesting method of assessing and evaluating such negative attitudes would be to take a step backwards in time and analyzing some defining moments of America's involvement with its boarding neighbor.

Besides many American's belief in having "Divine Right", the god-given privilege to inhabit land and develop it according to one's needs, regardless of the original inhabitants wishes, the

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Mexican-American War actually found its roots in the Texas War of Independence. During the 1820s and 30s, a newly independent Mexico sought out willing settlers to occupy and develop its northern territories. American settlers came by the thousands to take advantage of this opportunity. They moved into the Mexican province of Texas, took an oath to the country, and even converted to its religion, Catholicism.

However, soon after the newly converted “Texicans” or “Texians” moved onto the land, they became disgruntled with the way the Mexican government ran the province, ultimately resulting in their revolt against the country. In 1836, only one year after the bloody revolt began, the Mexican president, while in captivity by the “Texicans,” unwillingly signed the Treaty of Velasco, thus giving Texas its independence. But neither the Mexican citizens nor their government recognized this “Treaty” because it was brought into fruition by force.

The now Republic of Texas continued to engage in hostilities toward Mexico. Then on July 4, 1845, in an effort of retaliation, the republic officially became a part of the United States. As a result of this annexation, Mexico brought troops to the “border” in an effort to reclaim the land that was originally part of its province in Texas. On April 25, 1846, U.S. and Mexican troops clashed with one another, officially leading the two nations into the Mexican-American War.

It is important to note that there are suspicions that the U.S. had backed the Republic of Texas’ revolt against Mexico from the very beginning. A

theory that some argue were typical of America’s thought of “Divine Right” to rule. Regardless though, it is easy to recognize the unscrupulous manner in which Mexico was forced to sign the Treaty of Valsco, thus having its land essentially usurped from them.

Over the course of a brutal two-year military campaign, the Americans seized various Mexican territories to include Texas, parts of California and at last Mexico City. By this point the Mexican army was tired, beaten, and ready to surrender in defeat to the might of the American military. On February 2, 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. This peace treaty in effect would be responsible for aiding American arrogance toward the achievement of its wayward prophecy of Divine Right, which is still a prevalent attitude today, as seen in the prevailing attitudes toward immigration.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo resulted in Mexico losing 55% of its prewar territory, including the Republic of Texas. The U.S. agreed to pay Mexico 15 million dollars for all or parts of what are now known as California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, and Kansas. In addition, the U.S. assumed over 3.5 million dollars of Mexican debt. The treaty also had a clause protecting the sale or transfer of land deeds already owned by Mexican citizens prior to the war, however, this agreement was later not honored by the U.S. government.

An important note to make here is that the United States was allowed to dishonor this agreement with Mexico regarding the land deeds, which then begs the question; “How many ‘illegal’ aliens’ might have actually been legal

benefactors to these land deeds if America had lived up to its original agreement with Mexico?" Of course there is no logical way of determining this, but it is interesting to note that 20 percent of Mexico's population actually resided in the territories that were handed over to the U.S. via The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

By the 1850s, the newly purchased "California" had increased fruit production and a source of labor was sought to harvest and work the crops, aiding in bolstering the U.S. economy. Given the proximity of Mexico to the "golden state", it was easy to hire Mexican migrate workers to carry out the grueling, backbreaking work. Within a 30-year period, an estimated 80,000 Mexicans immigrated to what was formerly their land to perform labor-intensive work for meager wages.

Then again in 1890, Mexican workers were brought on to work on the construction of the railroads. A whopping 60 percent of the total railroad workforce was comprised of Mexicans. In the 1900s, during World War I, when many of the nations men were off to war, Mexicans were hired on in large droves to work as machinist, mechanics, painters and plumbers; in effect, helping to sustain the U.S. economy during its overseas military campaigns.

However, many of the Mexican workers were subjected to abuse at the hands of their U.S. employers. So in 1920, their government drew up contracts that specified work hours, wages, designated place of employment and also permitted them to bring along their families. Thereafter, no Mexican worker was allowed to leave the U.S. without a contract.

Four years later, the U.S. Border Patrol was created, which inadvertently lead to a harsher life for Mexicans migrating to America for work. The inception of the border patrol now made anyone without a contract "illegal-alien."

It is important to note that during this same period of time, the U.S. was going through an economic depression. Therefore, one could deduce that the invention of the U.S. Border Patrol was a mere tactic employed to downsize the amount of outside labor (Mexicans) in order to make room for unemployed Americans. Or at the very least, it calmed dissenting Americans from complaining that all the U.S. jobs were being taken by the foreigners(i.e. Mexicans).

But when the U.S. went to war again in 1942 (WWII), it conveniently relaxed its border laws, letting in Mexican workers by the droves in order to support the war effort. "The Bracero Program" was enacted, which allowed more than 4 million legal Mexican workers to enter the United States as farm hands. However, once again, many of the ranchers took advantage of the language barrier, allowing Spanish-speaking workers to sign contracts written in English that stipulated unfair conditions. Some of the conditions included only allowing workers to return home for emergencies and only after having received the expressed consent of their employers.

But history would soon repeat itself as the war came to a close and returning service members sought employment. The U.S once again enacted legislation barring Mexican

labor with the “Employment Farm Labor Service.”

It is interesting to note here that regardless of the historical fact that Mexican workers helped sustain the U.S. economy during its time of need, many of the states who benefited most still feel no obligation toward these laborers. Ironically, it appears that the vicious cycle is occurring once again as the American economy is undergoing a recession many of its citizens, especially those closest to the border, now feel that Mexican labor is a threat to their own livelihood. And a result, these states who benefited most from “illegal” Mexican labor during the economic boom now want to bar them from having access to U.S. jobs and citizenship.

Ironically, every time the Mexican workers came to the U.S., they were not only paid unfairly low wages, but suffered other abuses as well. Therefore, it would be fair to say that these workers were exploited by the American industry and then thrown out of its borders when they were no longer needed, only to return to poverty-like conditions in Mexico.

After taking a brief look at the U.S.’ relationship with its southern bordering neighbor, it is easy to conclude that the illegal acquisition of Mexico’s land and the exploitation of its labor force was a major factor leading to America’s economic prosperity. It would be interesting to take an in depth look at how America and its citizenry have expressed their appreciation to Mexicans.

According to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement website, in 2008 Congress provided the U.S. Department of Homeland Security

(DHS), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) with significant funding to carryout the mission of improving and modernizing efforts to identifying “aliens” convicted of a crime, sentenced to imprisonment, and who may be deportable, and removing them from the United States once they are judged deportable. This program is called “Secured Communities”, part of the government’s effort to ensure the safety of Americans from the threat and violence of Mexican criminals.

Some of the program’s advertised benefits include reducing the “opportunity” for allegations of racial and ethnic profiling, providing more accurate identification of criminals based on biometrics, improving officer safety, and making more information available for improved investigative purposes. In addition, the program allows fingerprints taken at county jails to be directly inputted to a federal immigration database.

Even though the program’s mission states that it targets what the government calls “Criminal Aliens” or those immigrants who can be deported because of crimes that they have committed, its opponents say otherwise.

For example, New America Media, a governmental watchdog in the interest of ethnic minorities, upon closer inspection of the Secured Community program believes it reveals otherwise. They make this complaint about the Department of Homeland Security:

DHS includes people simply “charged” with a crime in its definition of “criminal aliens.” People are labeled criminals before they are given a chance to defend themselves in court. A

cornerstone of our criminal system is that a person is innocent until proven guilty. Yet under Secure Communities, people are put into deportation proceedings even if they are innocent of criminal charges or if the arrest was simply a pretext to check a person's immigration status.

The organization also believes that the lack of due process will ultimately result in racial profiling and "abusive agents" will not suffer any consequences for their actions.

DHS does not collect data that would reveal whether racial profiling is happening. The attempt to divorce police officers' motivations for arresting individuals and DHS' subsequent actions after the booking phase makes no sense. As the program is currently designed, a police officer can make a pre-textual arrest and later drop the charges, but an individual can still be placed into deportation proceedings.

Thus far, Secured Communities has been implemented in 27 states with an estimated 279,000 people deported and of those, 79,000 are from California alone. Nearly half of California's 58 counties have enacted the program, including all of the Bay Area except Napa and Marin.

It would appear that once again Mexicans are being singled out for deportation from the U.S. but this time with the aid of technology---a biometric database. But for some Americans this system is not effective enough. On July 29, the state of Arizona, which once

belonged to Mexico, took federal law into its own hands and enacted SB1070.

This controversial law requires that the police, while enforcing other laws, check the legal status of individuals whom they suspect of being illegal. The new Arizona law, similar to the DHS' Secured Communities Program, states that racial profiling will not be used during its enforcement. However, from the first day of the law's inception people have touted it as being inherently racist. In fact, the Department of Justice filed suit against Arizona, promising to keep a vigilant watch over the state to further ensure against racial profiling. All together though, the DOJ is not pleased with Arizona's new law, accusing the state of overstepping its boundaries.

"There is big difference between a state or locality saying they are not going to use their resources to enforce a federal law...and a state passing its own immigration policy that actively interferes with federal law. That's what Arizona did in this case," said Tracy Schmaler, a spokeswoman for Attorney General.

The mastermind behind SB1070, Arizona Senator Russell Pierce, is currently drafting up legislation that will require illegal immigrants to pay for their children's schooling and deny birth certificates of infants born to illegal immigrant parents. And now there are at least 20 other states that are considering Arizona-style immigration laws.

Ironically these same harsh, discriminatory and racist laws come from states that not only officially belonged to Mexico prior to the illegal signing of the Treaty of Velasco, but from the very states that mainly

benefited from the cheap labor providing by Mexican immigrants during America's turbulent times, i.e. World War's I & II. In fact, one could rightfully question where these states would be economically if it were not for the toil of the Mexican worker.

Another disturbing phenomena in Arizona, Texas and California (states who have benefited the most from these workers) are the terrorist-like tactics of "Minutemen". These groups with their Neo-Nazi ideals consider themselves American patriots whose mission is to "protect" the nation's borders by taking the law into their own hands.

Armed with semiautomatic rifles, leader Jason "JT" Ready and his band of fellow armed vigilantes patrol the Arizona border in search of immigrants attempting to cross illegally. Ready feels that Arizona's 1870 and the Obama Administration efforts to decrease illegal immigration is not enough, which is where paramilitary group fits into the picture.

"The US Border Guard volunteer Border Rangers AKA 'Ready's Rangers', will keep patrolling the Sonoran desert for Narco-terrorists and securing the border. That's what we do. The dangerous job nobody else is willing to do," he told the Associated Press.

Again it is interesting to note that a Ready and his "Rangers" reside in a state that has historically benefited directly from the fruits of labor provided by the same Mexican immigrants they now feel the need to block from coming into the country. Unfortunately, it is this exact kind of attitude that is becoming more prevalent amongst American citizenry.

It is as if the people of the United

States to include the elected officials need a history lesson on not only how the bread basket of this country (California, Arizona, Nevada, etc) became part of America, but also on the important, undeniable role Mexicans have played in building this nation from scratch. Maybe then American attitudes toward Mexican immigration will change for the better.

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